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ABSTRACT

A collaboration between general and special education can help rural school districts improve services to severely disabled students. This paper presents a conceptual model for rural school administrators to define current practices in their districts and to develop alternatives for educating students with severe disabilities within a rural general education program structure. The model uses four "frames" for assessing current practices: the structural frame, the human resources frame, the political frame, and the symbolic frame. The use of the frames is illustrated and issues associated with meeting the needs of students in special education settings (for example, classroom location, school policy, and curriculum), are discussed. Studied within the human resource frame were the assumptions that special education students have limited potential, and that "special services" are the most effective. The political frame illustrates current realities of scarce resources, competition for limited funding, and lack of bargaining power of disabled programs. Using the symbolic frame, administrators may consider "messages" about system values being conveyed through the practices in each of the other frames. The multi-frame view forces rural school administrators to view their schools from a wider perspective and encourages them to approach decision making with new tools. (TES)

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Students with Severe Disabilities in the General Education Program: A Conceptual and Practical Framework for Rural School Administrators

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Students with Severe Disabilities in the General Education Program: A Conceptual and Practical Framework for Rural School Administrators

Rural school administrators are no different than their urban counterparts in their concern for quality education. According to recent surveys, rural school effectiveness has been at the top of research priorities for rural school personnel (Barker & Muse, 1983; Dunne & Carlson, 1981; Helge, 1985; as cited in DeYoung, 1987). From these surveys, it could be assumed that rural school administrators would want a quality education for all their students, including those with disabilities.

P.L. 94-142 was intended to improve the quality of education for students with disabilities by mandating that all public schools provide a free, appropriate, public education, in the least restrictive environment. Yet, over a decade after passage of the Act, it was determined that students with severe disabilities were often unserved or underserved, and were most in need of improved services (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 1987). Rural schools in particular have been targeted as needing specific improvements in serving students with severe disabilities (OSERS, 1987) and rural administrators affirm that these students are the most difficult population to serve (Helge, 1984b). Rural schools have historically struggled with meeting state standards with typically limited resources (Sher, 1988), and Stephens and Turner (1988) acknowledge that "projected increases in the eligible pool of handicapped students would, of course, complicate further the programming, staffing, and financial difficulties faced by rural small school district superintendents and boards of education" (p. 62).

The possibilities of merging general and special education (Lilly, 1988; Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987; Stainback & Stainback, 1984; Will, 1986) may assist rural school districts in providing a quality education for all students. With the cost of special education averaging 2.3 times more than general education programs, and the cost of segregated special education placements averaging over 31% higher than costs in less restrictive environments like resource rooms (Decisions Resources Corporation, 1988), rural administrators

should seriously consider less restrictive environments and the restructuring of general and special education in their rural districts.

One central tenet of the collaboration between general and special education is that students with disabilities would not be bused to a special educational setting to receive services, but would attend their closest school in their community--their home school (Thousand, Fox, Reid, Godek, Williams, & Fox, 1988). Based on the effective schools research which supports site-based management (Bickel & Bickel, 1986; Rosenholtz, 1985), it is critical that school principals, with the support of their superintendent, assume the primary responsibility for general and special education in their schools.

Descriptions of exemplary rural programs have provided examples of how rural special educators are attempting to meet the needs of students with severe disabilities (Budde, 1983; Condon, 1983; Helge, 1984b; Snart, 1985; Tawney, 1979), including strategies used to serve rural students in the least restrictive environment (Helge, 1986; McKenzie, Hill, Sousie, York, & Baker, 1977; Singer, 1984; Thousand, et al., 1988; Zeph, 1983). However, rural school administrators need a broader framework in which to make decisions which will have an impact on all students within the entire education program (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987)--a framework which is informed by theory based research in educational administration.

This paper will first present one conceptual framework which rural school administrators can use to guide their decision-making for all students. Second, rural school administrators can use the framework to define current practices in their districts, and the results of a recent study will illustrate this process. Third, the conceptual model will be used to develop alternatives when educating students with disabilities within the structure of the general education program in rural settings--alternatives which can enhance the effectiveness of the entire school program.

Conceptual Framework

To help modern managers make sense of and use the knowledge emanating from the plethora of organizational studies and theories, Bolman and Deal (1984) categorized this research and literature into four frames. Their

approach is a response to the question: "What does organization theory and research have to say that is genuinely important and useful to practitioners?" (p. xiii). They further propose that

> ". . . frames are windows on the world. . . Frames help us to order the world and decide what action to take. Every manager uses a personal frame, or image, of organizations to gather information, make judgments, and get things done. . . Understanding organizations is nearly impossible when the manager is unconsciously wed to a single, narrow perspective. . . managers who understand their own frame--and who can adeptly rely on more than one limited perspective--are better equipped to understand and manage the complex everyday world of organizations" (pp. 4-5).

The frames in part

1. "Tell the individual what is important and what can be safely ignored.
2. Group a lot of different pieces of information into patterns or concepts" (p. 16).

The four frames Bolman and Deal (1984) use to categorize organizational theory include the structural frame, human resource frame, political frame, and symbolic frame. While not comprehensive, due to the limits of this paper, some basic assumptions and limitations of each frame are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Current Practices

One useful way for the rural school administrator to utilize Bolman and Deal's frames is to illuminate current special education practices in their district and/or school. To illustrate this function of the frames, some results of a recent study which focused on rural students with severe disabilities (Capper, 1988) will be described using the frames. The study explored the product, the process, and the rural context of implementing P.L. 94-142 with students with severe disabilities. Although the sample was limited to three students in three, disadvantaged, rural school districts, the results of the study confirm and illustrate issues associated with meeting the needs of

these students in these settings (see summary in Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

Structural Frame

Current practices for rural students with severe disabilities in these districts from the structural view include classroom location, school policy, and curriculum. Most services for this population take place in school-based "units" where all students with the label of moderate to severe disabilities are bused. These classroom are located away from the general education classrooms in a separate wing, separate hall, or separate building. School policies either did not include students with disabilities, or special needs are allocated a separate section in the faculty or student handbook. For example, grading procedures for general and special education are in separate sections of the school handbook. Also, one school's floor plan, located in the student handbook, did not include the rooms for students with special needs. Finally, in terms of curriculum, while much attention is given to general education students' basic skills achievement, the curriculum for students with severe disabilities is virtually non-existent, with student instructional time ranging from 0% to little over 33% of the school day.

Human Resource Frame

Two primary current practices from the Human Resource perspective are the assumption that students with severe disabilities have very limited human potential and the belief that "special services" are the most effective. The education of these students is provided mostly on a "feeling sorry for" basis, rather than encouraging the development of individual potential. For example, one principal stated "you know, there isn't much we can do except make her comfortable. . . it's too bad these things happen." Probably due to the fact that rural school administrators most often emulate urban service delivery (Capper, 1988c), they perceive that separate service delivery is most effective. For example, one administrator proudly described the separate transportation service for students with moderate to severe disabilities including separate buses, bus

drivers, and bus aides, which picked up students "right at their front door." He did not consider the benefits for these students when attending their own local school, and the fact that because none of the students with special needs on the bus are verbal, and several students exhibit challenging behaviors, positive models of social interaction are non-existent.

Political Frame

The political perspective illuminates three other current practices for rural students with severe disabilities, in the area of scarce resources, competition for limited funding, and lack of bargaining power. Because rural school districts often do not have adequate resources to meet state mandates, and personnel feel students with severe disabilities have limited potential, these students are a low priority on the budget allocations. Teachers receive very little support for instructional materials. Rather than a concern for a quality education for all students and allocating resources accordingly, the special and general education components are viewed as competing for these scarce resources. Finally, rural parents and their children with severe disabilities have little power in influencing services (see a related article Capper, 1988a). Advocates are not easily accessible and parents are not organized to support change.

Symbolic Frame

The symbolic frame is perhaps more difficult to utilize in conceptualizing current practices in rural schools, but, as can be confirmed by the research and literature on school culture, this frame is vitally important. Rural school administrators can consider what "message" the practices in the structural, human resource, and political frames are conveying to school personnel, students, and the community about what is valued in the school. Historically, compliance indicators have been used to symbolize meeting student needs appropriately. However, in Capper's (1988b) study, even though all three districts are technically in compliance with P.L. 94-142, the dearth of instruction time and the lack of social interaction with peers would lead one to question the meaning of the school day for these students. In addition, the student isolation and the lack of peer interaction conveys a

message to general education students that persons with disabilities have little to offer to them and have less human value (see Lipsky & Gartner, 1987).

Not only can the four frames be used to analyze current practices in rural education, but the frames can also guide the development of goals and processes for restructuring general education to meet the needs of all students. Herbers (1988) and Holbrook (1988) discuss how local school administrators can use the frames to organize the process of integrating students into the general education program. The focus of this paper is developing positive goals for both general and special education, considering all four perspectives in that development.

New Possibilities for All Students

Bolman and Deal (1984) contend ". . . each frame has its own vision of reality. Only when managers can look at organizations through the four are they likely to appreciate the depth and complexity of organizational life. Successful managers rely intuitively on the different frames, blending them into a coherent, pragmatic, personal theory of organizations" (p. 6). Thus, when rural school administrators consider the restructuring of general and special education in their own school, they should consider all four frames. Examples of how rural school administrators can use the four perspectives to develop integrative goals for all students are described and summarized in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

Summary

There can be no doubt that rural school administrators would desire a quality education for all students, including those with even the most severe disabilities. Restructuring rural schools and ushering in a collaborative arrangement between general and special education can be one step towards extending limited resources and instituting a quality education for all students.

The utility of the multi-frame view, supported by the literature in organizational theory and behavior and advocated by Bolman and Deal, is that it forces rural school administrators out of viewing their schools from

narrow and limited perspectives. In addition the frames provide the school administrator with a decision-making framework to define current practice and to outline future goals and a vision which encompass all students regardless of differences in learning. In the midst of the current increase in student diversity in our rural schools, a multi-frame perspective can move rural school administrators from surviving to thriving--to not only face the challenges, but embrace them.

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Table 1
Bolman and Deal's (1984) Conceptual Framework of Organizational Theory and Behavior

Structural Frame
Assumptions
1. Organizations exist primarily to accomplish established goals.
2. For any organization, there is a structure appropriate to the goals, the environment, the technology, and the participants.
3. Organizations work most effectively when environmental turbulence and the personal preferences of participants are constrained by norms of rationality.
4. Specialization permits higher levels of individual expertise and performance.
5. Coordination and control are accomplished best through the exercise of authority and impersonal rules.
6. Structures can be systematically designed and implemented.
7. Organizational problems usually reflect an inappropriate structure and can be resolved through redesign and reorganization. (p. 32).

Limitations
1. Fails to see that human behavior is sometimes non-rational
2. It avoids power and conflict.
3. Rationality only is applicable in certain and predictable processes and outcomes.

Human Resource Frame
Assumptions
1. Organizations exist to serve human needs.
2. Organizations and people need each other.
3. When the fit between the individual and the organization is poor, one or both will suffer.
4. When the fit is good between the individual and the organization, both benefit.
5. Conflict is seen as a failure of leadership.

Limitations
1. It tends to impose middle class values.
2. Ignores individual differences.
3. Too optimistic about integrating individual and organizational needs.

4. Has a negative view of authority, and has not addressed power and scarce resources.

Political Frame

Assumptions

1. Most of the important decisions in organizations involve the allocation of scarce resources.
2. Organizations are coalitions composed of a number of individuals and interest groups.
3. Individuals and interest groups differ in their values, preferences, beliefs, information, and perceptions of reality.
4. Organizational goals and decisions emerge from ongoing processes of bargaining, negotiation, and jockeying for position among individuals and groups.
5. Because of scarce resources and enduring differences, power and conflict are central features of organizational life. (p. 109). (Conflict is unavoidable and can be productive)

Limitations

1. Underestimates the significance of rational and collaborative processes.
2. The frame is cynical and pessimistic.
3. It tends to be amoral. It is not important what you accomplish, but whether you win.

Symbolic Frame

Assumptions

1. What is most important about any event is not what happened but the meaning of what happened.
2. The meaning of an event is determined not simply by what happened but by the ways that humans interpret what happened.
3. Many of the most significant events and processes in organizations are substantially ambiguous or uncertain--it is often difficult or impossible to know what happened, why it happened, or what will happen next.
4. Ambiguity and uncertainty undermine rational approaches to analysis, problem solving, and decision making.
5. When faced with uncertainty and ambiguity, humans create symbols to reduce the ambiguity, resolve confusion, increase predictability, and provide direction. Events themselves may remain illogical,

random, fluid, and meaningless, but human symbols make them seem otherwise (p. 150)

Limitations

1. Tension with rationality
2. Looks at appearances.
3. When symbols do not have meaning, it backfires.
4. Masks or inflates your original goals.

Table 2
One Example of Conceptualizing Current Practices in Rural Special Education

Structural Frame
1. Classroom isolation
2. A limited curriculum
3. Not an integral part of school policies

Human Resource Frame
1. "Special services" are most effective
2. Students are perceived as having limited human potential

Political Frame
1. A low priority in budget allocations
2. Special and general education compete for resources
3. Parents and students have little bargaining power

Symbolic Frame
1. Use compliance indicators to symbolize meeting student needs
2. Student isolation and lack of peer interaction conveys a value of intolerance for human differences.

Table 3
New Possibilities for All Students

Structural Frame
1. Students attend general education classrooms in their local school.
2. School policies include all students in an integrated way.
3. Special and general education teachers share expertise.

Human Resource Frame
1. Practice of developing optimum human potential in each student.
2. Education seeks to be focused on student needs, rather than the student forced to adapt to the existing programs.
3. Learning is cooperative rather than competitive, and supportive of student differences.

Political Frame
1. Families and students with and without disabilities form a united coalition to obtain more resources from state levels.
2. Families advocate for one another.
3. Rural districts have their own system advocate for state level influence.

Symbolic Frame
1. School philosophy and vision pertain to all students.
2. State awards (i.e., for excellence or effectiveness) include criteria for all students.
3. All school rituals and ceremonies (i.e., awards day, graduation) are for all students.